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An Italian Foreign Policy of Religious Engagement: Challenges and Prospects

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A new awareness on the role of religion in international relations has started to inform concrete policy discussions in several Western Ministries of Foreign Affairs under the heading of 'religious engagement' in foreign policy. Italy is no exception but as the country which hosts the Holy See represents a special case. As the approach to religion found in the historical record of the Italian foreign policy shows, Italy has a comparative advantage and could well develop a unique model of religious engagement by strengthening the central structures involved in religious matters and foreign policy as well as by using the vast network of Rome-based religious non-state actors as a forum of consultation and policy advice.

Against the prediction of the secularisation thesis, it has gradually become clear in the last quarter of century that religion is back at the centre stage of international politics. As Toft, Philpott and Shah remind us in their recent book, *God's Century*, politicians and diplomats in the 21st century must "learn to live with the fact that the issue is not whether, but when and how, religious actors will enter public life and shape political outcomes".¹ It is only in the last five years, however, that governments have been looking at the global resurgence of religion in international affairs as a specific policy challenge which requires strategic thinking and appropriate policy responses: this new, small, but fast growing, policy area is now often referred to as 'religious engagement' in foreign policy.² Ministries of Foreign Affairs of European countries such as France and the United Kingdom, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands, Norway and Hungary have started to strengthen their capacity to engage with the unexpected global resurgence of religion in world politics in order to "make better policy and to make a bigger difference", as the title of a recent conference sponsored by the Foreign Office suggests.³ The US, the EU and Canada have moved in a similar direction by creating new offices and advisors' roles.

This policy challenge represents, for the country hosting the Holy See, an interesting case-study and opportunity to reformulate the traditional approach to religion found in the

¹ Toft, Philpott and Shah, *God's Century*, 211.

² See Mandaville and Silvestri, "Integrating Religious Engagement and Diplomacy".

³ "Religion, foreign policy and development: making better policy to make a bigger difference", Wilton Park, 5 February 2014, <https://www.wiltonpark.org.uk/conference/wp1311/>

historical records of Italian foreign policy. Against this background, we argue that the Italian government could strengthen its foreign policymaking by engaging more with religious actors at home and abroad, and integrating religious awareness and engagement in its foreign policymaking process. It could do this in a variety of ways: learning and adapting the existing best practice of religious engagement of other foreign ministries, building on the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MAECI)'s existing efforts and capacities on religious engagement and, finally and most importantly, by using to full advantage Italy's unique geo-religious position as a unique hub of a transnational network of religions connections. In a globalised world with an increasing number of great powers, middle powers and emerging powers, this offers Italy the possibility of playing to its uniqueness and comparative advantages and developing a specifically Italian model of religious engagement in foreign policy.⁴

The first part of this article discusses the emergence of the idea and practice of religious engagement in foreign policy. The second part provides an episodic overview of the traditional approach to religion that can be found in the historical record of Italian foreign policy throughout its four main periods, namely the liberal period, the fascist era, the 'First Republic', and the 'Second Republic'." In the light of these insights, the final part of the article puts forward an argument for an Italian foreign policy of religious engagement with respect to a number of recent policy challenges. In conclusion, some ideas are set out regarding the diplomatic tools that might help to move the religious engagement agenda forward.

From 9/11 to 'religious engagement' in foreign policy

The growing research produced in the last twenty years to address the neglected role of religion in international affairs has finally begun to break through and inform concrete policy discussions in the foreign policymaking community. We can schematically identify three moments of this realisation that religion *does* matter in international relations. The first was a sort of shock awakening reaction: following the end of the Cold War, a predominant discourse emerged which saw the resurgence of religion primarily in the form of a violent-prone form of politics, almost like "the revenge of God", or as if there were only "terror in the mind of God" as some of the titles of the first books focusing on this resurgence suggested.⁵ The examples were many: from the politics of identity along religious-nationalist lines in the Bosnian conflict to the worldwide rise of radical Islamism and terrorism; from the American Christian Right to Hindu Nationalism and militant Buddhism in South East Asia. 9/11 exemplified this worrying trend of the new irrational-religious sources of world disorder and possibly of a forthcoming "clash of civilizations".⁶

The second moment was a more reflexive one: scholars started to recognise that the above-mentioned understanding of the global resurgence of religion – by definition a threat to security, inimical to 'modernity' and to the resolution of conflicts – was based on a problematic set of assumptions.⁷ It was an ideological understanding more than a social-scientifically based and historically-grounded analysis. Scott Thomas called these

⁴ Petito and Thomas, "Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge"; de Charentenay, "Religione e politica estera"["de" is low case as typical in French surnames].

⁵ Kepel, *The Revenge of God*; Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*.

⁶ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*.

⁷ Petito and Hatzopoulos, *Religion in International Relations*.

problematic assumptions the “Westphalian presumption”, others “the myth of religious violence”.⁸ In other words, this second moment was about realising that analysts had been overlooking the positive political role that religion could play in the modernisation, democratisation, development and even peace-building in many parts of the world. In the words of the pioneering book by Scott Appleby, religion was politically ambivalent: on the one hand, it could promote political violence and conflict, but, on the other, also non-violent civic engagement, development, conflict-resolution and even reconciliation.⁹

The third moment consisted in a policy-oriented discussion informed by the second multifaceted understanding of the role of religion in international relations. An important stage in this moment was the publication of an influential report in 2010 by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs entitled *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad: A New Imperative for US Foreign Policy*.¹⁰ By critically reflecting on the lessons learned in Iraq and Afghanistan, it argued that Western governments failed to understand that, in collapsing and so-called failed states, local mainstream Islamic communities played a key role in providing education, sanitation and other social services when the state structure no longer existed. Framing religion through a counter-terrorist framework prevented bringing religion in constructively as part of the solution to build stability, the central objective of the international community’s new comprehensive approach to security and development. The Chicago report contributed to conceptualising the idea of ‘religious engagement’ which informed the 2013 State Department’s new “US Strategy on Religious Leader and Faith Community Engagement” and paved the way for the creation of what is now the Office of Religion and Global Affairs. The aim of this new US strategy is to engage religious leaders and communities abroad to promote development and humanitarian assistance; advance human rights, including religious freedom; and prevent and resolve conflict. Quite a paradigm shift, at least on paper, from the post-9/11 framing of religion – read Islam – through the counter-terrorism prism only!

The transition from an understanding of the political role of religion in international affairs beyond what we could call the securitisation paradigm (i.e. religion as a security problem), towards the concept and practice of religious engagement is not easy. There is also a degree of unavoidable ambiguity at present regarding the notion of religious engagement, which will hopefully be overcome as more conceptual and practical work is done on the topic. From our perspective, by religious engagement we do not mean the simple diplomatic activity of ‘reaching out’ to cultivate good relations with religious actors. These initiatives are not new and are actually part of the common diplomatic culture; as such, they do not represent an exception with regard to the wider and somewhat vague concept of public diplomacy. Rather, religious engagement implies entering into a profound conversation, in which listening is the most relevant part. It should not be confused, for instance, with the idea of ‘transformative diplomacy’, understood as a dialogue pursuing some sort of fundamental change in the attitude, mentality or behaviour of an interlocutor. Nor is religious engagement by any means the equivalent of ‘moral suasion’ towards difficult or recalcitrant subjects. In the process of religious engagement, diplomats should genuinely ‘engage’ themselves, meaning that they cannot adopt a by-stander attitude, remaining *outside* the social construction of the dialogue itself. In other words, engagement means full involvement, without necessarily becoming sympathetic. If not all diplomats are engaged in negotiations in critical junctures, all diplomats in different stages of their career are engaged in reporting, and they need to become, to some extent,

⁸ Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion*; Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*.

⁹ Appleby, *The ambivalence of the sacred*.

¹⁰ Appleby and Cizik, *Engaging Religious Communities Abroad*.

‘insiders’ in order to represent as accurately as possible the main elements at stake in complex societies.

For religious engagement to be a credible conversation, however, a generic intercultural background (the skills allowing diplomats to negotiate across cultures) is not sufficient. Diplomats must be aware that religions are part of, but at the same time different from, cultures, since religions have deeper roots in the identity of human beings and communities. Religious engagement does not mean just taking religions seriously; it is about the readiness to enrich, expand and transform the Westphalian diplomatic categories. One of the major consequences of this process may be rebalancing the diplomatic focus from an interstate paradigm to a transnational vantage point. However, this enrichment of the Westphalian outlook must be managed skilfully in order to avoid any possible backlash in terms of violation of the domestic political domain by diplomatic agents.

Such an understanding of religious engagement has emerged over the last five years in the context of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs’ initiative on religions and international relations, which has sponsored a yearly international seminar since 2009.¹¹ By gathering together not only scholars of religions and international relations, but also diplomats, policymakers and media actors working in the area of religion, as well as religious representatives, movements and associations active particularly in inter-religious dialogue, this initiative has contributed not only to raising awareness of the growing relevance of religion in international affairs in the Italian foreign policymaking community, but also to developing *in nuce* an approach emphasizing a new form of knowledge generated through the encounter and dialogue with religious communities and religious non-state actors.¹² From this perspective, religious engagement becomes a critical way to improve the knowledge base for foreign policy.

In an increasingly culturally pluralistic and politically fragmented international society, religious dynamics are contributing to many epoch-making changes and transformations that existing Euro-centric and secular frameworks of analysis are struggling to understand. The knowledge deficit often lamented today in foreign policy discussions is significantly related to the local, the societal, the culturally-specific much more than is acknowledged by many foreign ministries, commentators and analysts of international relations. Globalisation has paradoxically amplified the political role of local spaces and cultural identities at multiple levels and religious actors seem to be well equipped to access, understand and interpret these dynamics. But before exploring the prospects of how Italian foreign policy could more systematically engage with religious actors in the current fast-changing and complex diplomatic landscape, a brief look will be taken at the traditional approach to religion that can be found in the historical records of Italian foreign policy.

Italian foreign policy and religions: an historical overview

A literature search on the topic of Italian foreign policy and religion would result at best in some scattered references to the institutional state-to-state relationship between Italy and the

¹¹ In cooperation with the Institute for International Political Study (ISPI), the project was located within the Policy Planning Unit of the MAECI at the initiative of its head, who briefly referred to its history in the introduction of his recent book; see Ferrara, *Global Religions and International Relations*.

¹² For an analysis of this approach, see Petito and Thomas, “Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge”.

Vatican, or possibly some even more scattered references to the diplomacy of the Holy See.¹³ This is to some extent unsurprising and perplexing at the same time. It is unsurprising in that, as has been argued, a discussion of the relationship between religion and foreign policy in Italy cannot but start with the Pope, as the head of the Catholic Church, the Curia, as its central administration, the Holy See, as a unique type of international actor and Rome, as the central location of all these aspects of the Catholic Church.¹⁴ It is perplexing in that the lack of substantial scholarship even on these relevant dimensions of the religion/foreign policy nexus has arguably helped to reproduce two ideologically-polarised, rather than historically-based, readings of the influence of the Papacy on Italian foreign policy: on the one hand, the papacy's overwhelming influence and, on the other, its irrelevance.

To the best of our knowledge, the fascinating and complex history of the interactions between Italian foreign policy and the Catholic Church in general has not yet received a comprehensive assessment. Our take on it would be that this history is marked not only by the different historical international contexts and papacies, but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the different ways in which the relationship has evolved through the four main periods of Italian foreign policy – namely the liberal period, the fascist era, the 'First Republic', and the 'Second Republic'. In what follows, we briefly analyse some episodes of this history with a view to drawing some lessons on the prospects for developing a foreign policy of religious engagement.

The Liberal Era

After the conquest of Rome (the entry of the Italian Army in the City of Rome was a minor military event with major political consequences), the relationship between Church and state was in itself a part of Italian foreign policy, in consideration of the involvement of other European countries, namely France, in the 'protection' of the Italian Pontiff. The Catholic Church, more generally, was at odds with the liberal state, and many Catholics had to test their loyalty to the new-born nation against their allegiance to the Catholic hierarchy.¹⁵ The young Italian nation was at the same time agitated and excited with the "idea" of the "myth" of Rome, bearing an aura of grandeur, imperial past, universality and "eternity".¹⁶ However, in that tense context of the early years of the newly united Kingdom of Italy – at the height of the Church and state conflict on the so-called *Questione romana*, when Catholic religious congregations were legally suppressed and the Church's *non expedit* provision forbade Catholics to participate in the elections of the new Italian state – some religious missions (No, keep as it is), especially the Franciscans, were used by the Liberal foreign policy elites as a critical instrument in foreign policy to promote Italy's "moral and material interests in the Levant".¹⁷

At the same time, ironically, with the loss of the national territory controlled by the Pope, the Italian Catholics started envisaging a symbolic map of the 'external' territories of the Church in the light of the traditional universalistic understanding of the role of Catholicism. A sign of

¹³ See, for example, Mammarella and Cacace, *Storia della politica estera italiana*. For one of the very few works focusing on the relationship between the Vatican and Italian foreign policy, see Pollard, "Il vaticano e politica estera italiana".

¹⁴ Petito and Thomas, "Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge", 46.

¹⁵ See Spadolini, *L'opposizione cattolica*.

¹⁶ See Chabod, *Storia della politica estera italiana*, 179-323.

¹⁷ Carmody, "Franciscans and Italian Foreign Policy".

this turn toward the outside world was the creation, in 1850, of the Institute for Foreign Missions (*Istituto per le Missioni Estere*), whose main objectives were training, supporting and administering Catholic missions abroad, in an attempt to project outside of Europe the very ‘Catholic nation’ that liberalism was constraining at home. The institute would play a crucial role in framing and articulating the missionary activity of the Catholic Church, and would be transformed into a national organisation by Pope Pius XI in 1926, with the denomination of Pontifical Institute for Foreign Mission (*Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere*).¹⁸

As a number of institutional reports suggested at the time, the missionaries held the key to Italian influence overseas, especially in the Mediterranean region.¹⁹ In the Italian colonies, Catholic orders were often involved in the education system; for instance, the Italian government signed an agreement with the Trinitarian order to oversee schools in Somalia. Similar patterns of supporting functions were also common in other contexts, such as Libya, although with less impact, due to the specific local conditions of tribal and religious allegiance.²⁰ Interestingly in the case of the Franciscans, this patriotic alignment argument was instrumentally used by the order to get state approval for the opening of the missionary college of St Anthony (or *Antonianum*) in Rome as an institution of higher education, something which finally happened during the fascist era in 1933. For the religious order, the aim was to rebuild Franciscan life in the aftermath of the laws of suppression in many countries. For the Italian government, the aim was to protect its interests in the world and in particular to open up a space for Italy amidst the European nationalisms in the Middle East.²¹

More generally, the Italian Catholic missionaries became increasingly aware of their functional and sometimes substitutive role in two ways: against the background of a weak and young state in the age of aggressive imperialism and in responding to the educational, welfare and spiritual needs of a growing and trans-continental Italian diaspora caused by mass migration at the end of the 19th century. The Italian missionaries, above and beyond the stereotypes of the “missionary-explorer” or the “missionary-patriot”, started to develop a more conscious and reflexive understanding of the concepts of nation, international community, civilisation and modernity, taking sides, for instance, against the slave trade and human exploitation in sub-Saharan Africa.²² On the other hand, the growing nationalist turn in missionary activities was criticized by Pope Benedict XV in 1919 in his Apostolic Letter *Maximun Illud*, in which he regretted that many missionaries were more interested in aggrandizing the “power” and the “glory” of their secular country abroad than advancing the cause of their heavenly homeland.²³

The Fascist Period

During the Fascist era, the major breakthrough of the Lateran Treaty (*Patti Lateranensi*), signed in 1929, inaugurated a new phase of normal bilateral relations between the Kingdom of Italy and the Holy See as well as a more stable Church-state national arrangement. This development influenced the Italian foreign policy agenda and, in particular, the colonial claims of the ‘proletarian nation’ produced mixed and sometimes opposing feelings among

¹⁸ See De Giuseppe, “Orizzonti missionari, coloniali, terzomondisti”.

¹⁹ Ministero degli Affari Esteri, *Relazione al parlamento*.

²⁰ See Pretelli, “Education in the Italian colonies”.

²¹ Carmody, “Franciscans and Italian Foreign Policy”. See also Buffon, “Franciscans in the Holy Land”.

²² See De Giuseppe, “Orizzonti missionari, coloniali, terzomondisti”.

²³ *Ibid.*

the Catholic Church's constituencies. On the one hand, the traditional 'blessing of the arms' as a manifestation of the support of the majority of Italian Catholics for the colonial revival in Italian foreign policy is symbolic evidence of a realignment of the Church itself with the nationalist rhetoric of the regime, endorsing in some cases the image of the missionary-soldier, notwithstanding the existence of a minority opposed to the narrative of the 'civilising mission' of the Italian wars in Africa, especially in Eritrea and Ethiopia. The illegal colonial war started by Fascism against Ethiopia, a member of the League of Nations, represented a watershed moment in the 'nationalisation' of Catholic missions, since it was mainly interpreted as a providential event, allowing the spread of 'Roman Catholic civilisation' in a land considered both barbaric and heathen.

On the other hand, however, as the Fascist regime became more assertive about its own political goals, in some cases Church and state took diverging paths. In East Africa, the missionaries were increasingly attempting to bring about conversions, whereas the Fascist rulers started adopting a more 'liberal' policy of tolerance towards indigenous religions and cults in order to reduce risks of revolts. That led, among other things, first to the gradual substitution of textbooks and then to the replacement of missionaries as teachers in Ethiopia and Somalia after 1938.²⁴

In sum, Italian foreign policy during the liberal and Fascist eras showed what could be called an 'instrumentalist accommodation' with the Catholic Church, whose influence was appreciated as a national asset abroad but feared and controlled at home, where it represented a dangerous challenger to the political hegemony of the young Italian state. Interestingly, even if the liberal and Fascist regimes were both ideologically – though in different ways and degrees – hostile to Catholicism, their foreign policy often mobilised an assertive Catholic/Christian civilisation identity and rhetoric. This was the case of the 1911 colonial war in Libya, which was presented as a war of Christian conquest over Islam despite the strong opposition of Pope Pius X, who vehemently denounced this attempt and remained diplomatically neutral.²⁵

The First Republic

After World War II, Italian foreign policy did not explicitly articulate an approach to religion as a leading topic of international relations. This does not mean, however, that Italian foreign policy ignored the issue; rather, religious matters were 'embedded' in the Italian approach to North Africa and the Middle East as one of the many aspects of Italy's 'projection' in its southern periphery. The presence of old and strong Catholic minorities in both these regions, in particular, was seen as an important tool for strengthening the role of the country in the region. In this domain, especially during the Christian-Democrat governments, Italian foreign policy was both an expression of complex domestic dynamics and a result of the constraints of the Cold War. Rather than a matter of principle, religious concerns were a question of political realism, prudent foreign policy and a responsible attitude. Religion was taken for granted as the background of pragmatic and subtle initiatives in Italy's bilateral relations with Middle Eastern countries. In Africa, engagement with religion often took the form of protecting Catholic missionaries and their initiatives. In Latin America, the presence of large communities of Italian immigrants was the rationale for multiplying Catholic missions on the

²⁴ See Pretelli, "Education in the Italian colonies".

²⁵ See Sale, *Libia 1911*, cited in de Charentenay, "Religione e politica estera".

continent, in many cases with the active support of the local Italian diplomatic network. The role played from the 19th century onward by the Scalabrinian religious order could be mentioned here, in that it treated peaceful migration as a social phenomenon opposite to political and economic imperialism. In sum, the Catholic religion continued to be considered an asset for Italian foreign policy, since the country was inevitably regarded abroad as the location of the Vatican and home of the Holy Father.

This embedded approach was implemented under the Christian Democratic governments, especially during the era of Giulio Andreotti (who was prime minister, minister of defence, and minister of foreign affairs several times from the early 1970s until the early 1990s). Former Italian Ambassador Sergio Romano writes that several prudent, however proactive, positions taken by Andreotti in the Mediterranean and Middle East were not at all the result of an Italian ‘grand design’ in the region. Andreotti, like most of his prominent predecessors in the Christian-Democrat Party, was not a nationalist. A soft and slightly neutralist foreign policy may have seemed to Andreotti, according to Romano, the most suitable stance if the goal was to defend, in the long run, the permanent interests of the Catholic Church in the region. A direct clash between Arab nationalism and Western democracies would have damaged the interests of the Christian Arabs, the Church’s institutions and the more or less peaceful coexistence of Catholic organisations in Muslim-majority countries.²⁶ This approach reflected the porous borders between the Catholic Church hierarchy and the leaders and world of Christian Democracy: something that Christian Democratic leader and former Italian President, Francesco Cossiga, ironically captured when he described Andreotti as “the permanent secretary of state of the Vatican”.

Interestingly, the embedded approach shied away from the politicisation of Catholicism as a foreign policy identity, even if the Cold War ideological confrontation could have easily accommodated and to some extent justified such a logic, which continued to operate in many ways in the domestic context. An implicit reference to religious identity was, instead, present at a different level of foreign policy – the European level. In the case of De Gasperi, for example – and this applies also to other European Christian Democrat leaders like Konrad Adenauer and Robert Schuman who were strong promoters of the post-WWII European integration project – the idea that European countries shared a common culture, deeply influenced by the Christian religion, provided a strong foundation for European unity (either leave as it is or add “envisioning”). Nelsen and Guth have shown in a convincing way the role played by Catholicism, perhaps more than Protestantism (traditionally attached to the concept and practice of sovereignty and self-rule) in conceiving Europe as a single cultural entity. In the case of De Gasperi, the European project was understood through the conceptual lens of two universalistic claims: the first derived from the multi-national experience of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire, in which he lived most of his life and held official positions; the second stemming from the very essence of Catholicism as a pan-human and inclusive perspective.²⁷

During the Cold War, it is worth recalling the pioneering initiatives in what is now called ‘citizen diplomacy’ taken by Giorgio La Pira, mayor of Florence and a prominent Catholic figure: the eccentric Christian Democrat politician developed a new understanding of the needs and claims of the Third World, directed in particular at what became known as ‘the geography of hunger’, and sometimes even areas of strategic confrontation and conflict, such

²⁶ Romano, *Guida alla politica estera italiana*.

²⁷ See Nelsen and Guth, *Religion and the European Union*.

as Vietnam. His vision significantly shaped the attitude of many Catholic organisations towards Italy's policy of international aid, which had been criticised for serving Italian national interests and economic priorities rather than the needs and genuine aspirations for development of neglected peoples.²⁸

The Second Republic

With the end of the Cold War, religion emerged in a very different way as a specific subject of foreign policy. However, within the Italian MFA, as in similar institutions in many other European countries, religions were not seen as part of the fundamental challenges of international relations until recent times. Interestingly enough, the historical fall of the Berlin Wall coincided with a major political and institutional crisis in Italy, known as “Clean Hands” (*Mani Pulite*), in which many political players and parties were involved in corruption and embezzlement scandals. The trials related to these offences led to a political earthquake, with the annihilation of the Socialist and Christian-Democrat parties, and marked the end of the ‘First Republic’. The Catholics ended up in several new political formations, without a single party of reference and this was reflected in the articulation of the complex interconnection between religion and foreign policy. The new party called *Forza Italia*, headed by the tycoon Silvio Berlusconi, who claimed for himself the Christian-Democratic political electorate, seemed more prone to accommodate a conservative reading of Christianity as a factor of ‘exclusivist’ national identity by re-actualising some of the themes and tendencies discussed in the context of the Liberal and Fascist periods of foreign policy.²⁹ The First Republic approach to religion as an embedded and flexible tool of foreign policy seemed not to have survived the collapse of the religion-inspired political party central to Italian government for almost half a century.

Another fundamental change occurred after 9/11. In sectors of Western public opinion an interpretation of religion as a problem rather than as a part of the solution seemed to prevail, with a special emphasis on radical Islam and its more violent and intolerant expressions. Also, the only institutionalised dimension of foreign policy dealing with religion, the protection of freedom of religion and belief in the framework of human rights, was affected by this broader trend in the context of the ‘war on terror’. As a consequence, the narrative on ‘religious freedom’ was increasingly politicised and based upon the concept of ‘protecting’ Christian minorities. This was sometimes viewed with concern by reflexive actors in the Vatican, since it seemed to give some foundation to the accusation that the Christians in the Middle East were acting as ‘foreigners’, despite the fact that they had been living there for centuries and well before the birth of Islam. However, this particular, ‘militant’ approach regarding the place of religion in foreign policy was never endorsed, as such, by the Italian diplomatic service, which maintained a more realistic and concerned attitude based on the pursuit of a new role for the country in the area.

Today, the very idea of a ‘Christian’ or ‘Catholic’ country is out of step with the evolution of the political spectrum in Europe, where the cleavages are of a different kind (and related to social inclusion/exclusion, migration, political participation, criticism of representative democracy, the local/global). However, the concept of political engagement with (and inspired by) religious principles is not out of fashion – quite the contrary, in a post-secular society. Jurgen Habermas has unexpectedly argued that the moral intuitions of religions and

²⁸ See De Giuseppe, “Orizzonti missionari, coloniali, terzomondisti”.

²⁹ For a similar argument with reference to the return of geopolitical discourse in Italy, see Petito and Brighi, “Renaissance of Geopolitics”.

spiritualities become important resources to cure the pathologies of modernisation, including the crisis of an individualistic system of relations which prevents the construction of real and strong communities.³⁰ In a similar fashion, a foreign policy of religious engagement calls for the development of a post-secular (sensitivity in) foreign policy. Interestingly, in a recent article in *Civiltà Cattolica*, the only Catholic periodical directly revised and approved before publication by the Secretariat of State of the Holy See, Pierre de Charentenay, responding to these new emerging developments in the field of foreign policy, commented that “this orientation is indicative of a new relationship between religion and states, which the Catholic Church appreciates because it responds to the frame of relationships envisaged by the Vatican Council II: separation without isolation, dialogue and respect”.³¹ The practical question is how can Italy develop a ‘non-confessional’ foreign policy of religious engagement, that is an engagement with all the religious traditions deemed strategic and useful at a particular time, while building and expanding on Italian foreign policy’s traditional approach to religion clearly marked by its special relationship with the Catholic Church?

A transnational political-religious complex and new forms of inter-religious encounters and dialogue

Italy, as a secular state, embodies in its foreign policy the principle of pluralism and respect for diversity at the political, social, cultural and religious levels. At the same time, Catholicism, one of the most organised and articulated institutional religions worldwide, has its centre in Rome and this circumstance is neither ignored nor overlooked by the Italian diplomacy. However, there may be room for a more refined approach. As suggested, Italy has the possibility of developing an original foreign policy of religious engagement thanks to its ‘special’ relationship with the Catholic Church and its constellation of organisations around the world.³² Through this triangulation, Italy is in a unique position and could engage religious actors abroad more effectively by engaging religious actors at home. A series of epochal geopolitical, religious, technological and cultural transformations that are beyond the scope of this article³³ make it possible to claim that:

There is a sense in which, in this context, Rome has again become a kind of religious *caput mundi*, for it has a unique position, more than Washington, London, Paris, or Brussels, as the hub of a transnational network of religions connections. These transnational connections are not based only on the network of the Catholic Church, which is unique among the great worldwide religious organizations for its universal vertical structure converging in Rome. They also link Rome to other religious traditions, communities, and organizations through the mediation of the Catholic world – that is, via the links that the Holy See, local and national Churches, and the many Catholic organizations or non-state actors headquartered in Rome have worldwide with religious communities and leaders abroad. These connections are often based on long-standing relationships of reciprocal knowledge, sometimes of an official nature, but they are also

³⁰ Habermas, “Notes on a Post-Secular Society”.

³¹ De Charentenay, “Religione e politica estera”, 238, authors' translation.

³² Petit and Thomas, “Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge”.

³³ Two critical epoch-making changes which have been affecting the Catholic Church: first, the changing demographic nature of Catholicism in what many analysts describe now as global Catholicism, a religion of the Global South (see Linden, *Global Catholicism*); second, the process of de-Italianization of the *Curia* accelerated by the three last (non-Italian) Popes (see de Charentenay, “Religione e politica estera”)

part of growing friendships in the form of inter-religious dialogue and cooperation for the common good between Catholic actors and other religious actors.³⁴

What we are suggesting here is similar to what Timothy Byrnes has shown with reference to religious orders, in his fascinating empirical analysis of how three Catholic communities – Jesuit, Maryknoll and Benedictine – seek to shape US policy in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Mexico. Religious orders can create political feedback on national foreign policy, a sort of “reverse mission”, whose dynamic “resides at a fascinating intersection of two evolving strands of inquiry in the field of political science: *foreign policy interest group mobilization*”, from the subfield of national politics, and “*transnationalism* from the subfield of international relations.”³⁵ According to Byrnes, “this particular intersection of transnational identity and national policymaking process is in many ways the very heart of religious politics in our time.”(13) In terms of *mobilization*, the global outreach of religious orders shapes their lobbying activity on foreign policy decision-making as a sort of “domestic representation of foreign communities”, while they seek potential synergies in their operations at global scale with diplomatic structures.(16) As for the *transnational* nature of religious orders, it is a “simple but powerful fact that the religious identity shared by members of these communities straddles – and sometimes obliterates – international borders”.(22) This is not to suggest that the members of these orders stop being Americans or Italians or French. Rather, it is precisely because members of those orders are both citizens of their own countries and part of transnational religious communities that they can bring their communities’ interests to the policy processes with strong legitimacy. In a sense, they are insiders to both realms; this special status “provides them with both (a) the motivation to care deeply about national foreign policy and (b) the opportunity to try to influence its direction”.(22)

Moreover, one feature that religious orders share with the diplomacy is a vast, global network, with the added value, for religious orders, of operating in remote areas, in critical social and political contexts, and within local communities. For instance, on the Italian web platform called *Vidimus Dominum*, there are 207 Catholic male orders and 514 Catholic female orders, most of them headquartered in Rome. This is a global network, often dealing not only with religious matters, but also with policy issues.³⁶

Another interesting example is the Community of Sant’Egidio, known worldwide for its work on inter-religious dialogue and peace-building, and as a result nicknamed “the UN of Trastevere”.³⁷ Best known is the peace agreement Sant’Egidio brokered for Mozambique in 1992 after 15 years of bloody civil war which killed more than one million people. The critical role of mediation played by Sant’Egidio was possible not only because of the credibility the community had gained with both of the warring factions for its humanitarian work in the midst of the conflict, but also because of the coordination with the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the local Catholic Church in Mozambique. The Sant’Egidio experience in Mozambique clearly speaks to the potentialities of the triangulation mentioned as key to a successful model of Italian foreign policy of religious engagement. Interestingly, other less successful attempts, such as Sant’Egidio’s initiative in 1995 that facilitated the

³⁴ Petito and Thomas, “Encounter, Dialogue and Knowledge”, 47.

³⁵ Byrnes, *Reverse Mission*, 13.

³⁶ For instance, the network of religious orders set up a “working group on the preservation of the Creation” that dealt with, among other issues, the social consequences of mining activities and their relevance for local and regional conflicts, to contribute to the discussion generated by the recent Encyclical Letter by Pope Francis on the environment, and more recently dealt with food security and governance.

³⁷ Morozzo della Rocca, *Making Peace*.

creation of a platform for dialogue among the major opposition parties (including the Islamic Salvation Front) in Algeria to put an end to the civil war, points to the difficulties of achieving a positive outcome in the absence of coordination with an MFA; in this case, the Italian government, as well as those of other European countries, were *de facto* opposed to the Sant'Egidio platform.

Sometimes, there can be cleavages between national foreign policy agendas and the global agendas of non-state religious actors with a broader set of transnational priorities. Typically, in Italy, religious movements like the Focolari or Sant'Egidio have a transnational and universal perspective that is not always and not necessarily fully compatible with the Italian foreign policy agenda. A good example of non-overlapping approaches is the case of Lampedusa and 'illegal' immigrants, where Italian domestic and foreign policy do not necessarily coincide with the stance of religious groups, and even of the governing institutions of the Catholic Church. Other religious orders are reframing their missionary presence outside Europe on the basis of a post-colonial approach, aiming at deconstructing the narrative of globalisation as the default form of modernisation.³⁸

In a different domain, inter-religious dialogue could be considered a suitable background for détente and rapprochement, without being a substitute for sound diplomacy, in a deeply divided region like the Middle East. For instance, in March 2015, the Community of Sant'Egidio organised a conference in Rome on the "responsibility of believers in a global and plural world", with the participation of representatives of the Catholic Church and Shia institutions. In May 2015, six students from the female Shia seminary "Jami'at al-Zahra" in Qom (with an enrollment of 6000 female students) arrived at the Sophia University Institute, an academic centre of the Focolare Movement located near Florence, to spend an entire month interacting with the local academic community. Recently the Lateran University signed an agreement with the Shia University of Qom, in Iran, for a joint academic event to be held in Rome at the beginning of the Jubilee of Mercy announced by Pope Francis starting from December 2015.

The same applies for engagement with the Sunnis. In particular, the existence of a platform for dialogue such as the open letter from Muslim scholars to Christian leaders, called "A Common Word Between Us" represents the most developed effort at Muslim-Christian reconciliation to date.

Endorsed by well-known Muslim scholars from diverse sects and backgrounds, the letter emphasizes the central role of love of God and the Golden Rule in both religions and cites the catastrophic consequences of conflict. The signatories frame a norm of interreligious covenant for constructive collaborations, present their argument as an authoritative Islamic position, and effectively reject the clash-of-civilizations narrative.³⁹

The platform "offers a starting point for inter-faith engagement and"⁴⁰ between Islam and Christianity, in view of increased dialogue, cooperation and collective action between Muslims and Christians.

³⁸ Magazines like *Nigrizia* (linked to the Combonian missionary order) have been quite critical, for instance, of Italian international development cooperation in Africa and the operations of the Italian national oil company, ENI, in African countries.

³⁹ Malik, *Reconciliation*, 457.

⁴⁰ <http://www.acommonword.com/>

In most cases, the international community – and Italy is no exception in this – sees the role of religions in the ‘descending phase’ of world politics, when decisions have already been taken and challenges need to be addressed in an urgent manner. However, if religious engagement is to be taken seriously, one should start at home, involving religious groups and actors in the ‘ascending phase’ of foreign policy, in the very process of foreign policy formation, while maintaining mutual independence and avoiding confusion over roles and objectives. The previous discussion of some Italian-led initiatives of inter-religious dialogue, peacebuilding and transnational links seems to suggest that religious engagement could include, among others, at least two fields of action: structured dialogue with religious orders, and regular or ad hoc consultations on international crises with religious orders and Catholic movements. The former could be seen as a way of enriching the foreign policy initiatives with transnational links, allowing official governmental structures such as embassies and permanent representations to interact more competently with non-state religious actors; the latter could result in a more careful design of peace-keeping operations and post-conflict reconstruction and reconciliation efforts, in an effective partnership that would, however, preserve respective roles and responsibilities. In conclusion, we would like to suggest a few ideas of how this change of mindset could be achieved concretely in terms of diplomatic tools to strengthen Italy’s religious engagement capacity in foreign policy.

Some ideas on the tools for the way forward

The problem for Italian foreign policy when dealing with religion is not religious literacy, and it may not even be connected to a lack of training or the quality of it, two key areas on which the current policy discussion within a number of Western foreign ministries, as well as in the recently set up Transatlantic Policy Network on Religion and Diplomacy, has been focussing. The challenge – and this applies beyond the specific policy area of religious engagement⁴¹ – is transforming and expanding the scope of the diplomatic culture, so that diplomats can see religions not merely as cultural elements, but as structural components of foreign policy and international relations.

The practical fundamental question is: how can the MFA develop a system capable of filtering and transforming the wealth of this under-utilized religiously-based societal information and knowledge into analysis and input for better foreign policymaking? A set of appropriate tools has to be identified to do so. Here, it is important, however, to underscore two challenges that need to be taken into account: first, the new tools have to be realistically conceived and in line with the significant budgetary pressures the diplomatic service is facing; and second, the model has to enjoy bipartisan consensual acceptance, so as to avoid politicisation of the idea along ideological (Left/Right) or religious (believers/non-believers) cleavages.

One pragmatic proposal, considering the limited resources available in the MFA, which do not allow for the creation of additional structures and might also complicate further the distribution of competences in the Ministry, would be to enhance the already strong and well-established focus on ‘religions and international relations’ within the Policy Planning Unit. This is the option that has been followed by, for example, the *Quai d’Orsay* and the Swiss Ministry of Foreign Affairs to strengthen their respective religious engagement capacities. It should be agreed upon at the highest diplomatic and political level in the MAECI and would

⁴¹ See Giro, “Che diplomazia”.

require making ‘religious engagement’ one of the strategic priorities of policy planning. Concretely, it would require moving from planning to policy action by identifying a few pilot case-studies and working carefully and prudently on some specific policy issues or crises in coordination with a set of specific and relevant Italian religious non-state actors/partners, always bearing in mind the need to avoid confusion between the respective roles and responsibilities.

Another possibility would be to appoint an Ambassador-at-large for religious matters (not just for religious freedom) chosen from the ranks of the Italian diplomatic service. The option of empowering an Ambassador-at-large in this domain has been chosen, for example, by the US and Canada and has usually been accompanied by a contextual strengthening and broadening of the religious engagement focus in policy planning. This figure should be more than a mere ‘coordinator’, and should be adequately empowered and relatively autonomous. It would require a light budget for short missions, an essential, streamlined structure, which could use, for instance, the few human resources in principle devoted to the present (and not currently functioning) Observatory for religious freedom. His/her ‘mission’ could involve the following:

Domestically

- Constituting a single point of reference for religious movements and religiously oriented civil society organisations operating on the international scene (building mutual trust)
- Participating in the drafting of policies in crisis situations, peace-keeping and peace-building operations, representing religious aspects, needs, critical issues
- Interfacing with governmental agencies (including domestic affairs) and the parliament on international religious issues and programmes
- Assisting the MFA General Directorates on a day-by-day basis on religious matters
- Heading a standing consultative group on Religion and Italian Foreign Policy composed of religious representatives, members of central and local Italian institutions, think tanks experts, academics

Externally

- Representing Italy in international bodies such as the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation and perhaps the UN’s Alliance of Civilisations
- Carrying out ad hoc missions in crisis situations, if needed, providing advice and assistance to diplomats and other agents working on the ground
- Providing a point of contact with the European External Action Service for religious issues and an interface with a transatlantic or international network for religious engagement
- Working with the UN and other international and multilateral institutions on religious matters
- Participating in public events on religion and international affairs, especially in relation to the conceptual and factual link of religion with peace, violence and reconciliation.

Conclusion

In this article, we have made the case for a renewed Italian foreign policy of religious engagement. This has been done by assessing the country’s comparative advantage rooted in its

historical record of mutual influence between religion and politics and the new opportunities and challenges connected to the political transformations brought about by what has been described as a post-secular age. Religious engagement, we contend, is of great strategic relevance and topicality for Italy in the current international context. In particular, the processes initiated in the Arab-Islamic world imply an unprecedented test for Italian foreign policy. given its ambitions of playing a strategic role in the Mediterranean.

In order to improve the policy capacity of Italian foreign policy we have suggested strengthening and rationalising the central structures involved in religious matters and foreign policy, on the one hand; and on the other, to use the vast network of Rome-based religious non-state actors as a forum of consultation and policy advice. These two pragmatic steps may represent a net improvement in a distinctively Italian foreign policy of religious engagement.

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